



LITERACY VOLUNTEERS of Charlottesville/Albemarle

Program Partnership Readies Students for Nursing Careers

The challenges of the pandemic demonstrated to the world the immense value of medical staff and the severe shortage of qualified nurses. LVCA is preparing our students to pursue health care careers and gain employment in such high-demand fields.

LVCA works with Thomas Jefferson Adult and Career Education at Piedmont Virginia Community College (TJACE@PVCC) to ensure the English Language Learners enrolled in their courses have the support they need to complete their health care training. We have helped 19 students pursue a medical career certification. Nine of those obtained certification as a Certified Nurse Aide (CNA).

“TJACE’s partnership with LVCA has been very beneficial to our CNA for English Language Learners program,” said Debbie Tuler, ESOL Specialist at TJACE@PVCC. “While all students in the program receive integrated language, foundational, and soft skills instruction throughout the CNA training, some students need extra one-on-one support. LVCA’s tutors have enabled these students to successfully complete the program, pass the state board exam, and secure employment.”

Oftentimes, we are able to match students with an instructor who has a medical background. Tutors like Virginia P. Michel (RN, MSN, ANP) draw on their own career training to help students complete the program. Virginia felt like she found her calling as a tutor when she was able to use her background to help these students. Now, with each new semester, she waits to be matched with a student who needs the one-on-one support to complete their certification.

“When I started nursing school in the 1970s one of the first things we learned was, ‘If you care, you are halfway there.’ This turned out to be true, and is something I have never forgotten,” said Virginia.

Havva, one of our students who is a refugee from Afghanistan, worked as a nurse before immigrating to the United States in 2016. For students like her, the CNA program helps her get one step closer to her dream of

returning to a career as a nurse. She enrolled in the CNA program prior to the start of the pandemic and was able to finish and gain certification in January 2021.

“My teachers, Ms. Melissa, Ms. Chi, and Ms. Amanda are the best,” said Havva. “They helped me a lot. They were so clear and taught me, step by step, patiently.”

Havva hopes to join other LVCA students Bushiri and Dareen in gaining a job at UVA Medical Center.

“A career as a CNA is a wonderful choice for those who want to help people make a difference in their daily lives,” said Virginia. “This profession offers job stability, location flexibility, often provides employee benefits such as health insurance, as well as opportunities for advancement. Most of all, CNA careers can offer great personal satisfaction while fulfilling a valuable service to others.”



Havva completed the Certified Nurse Aide (CNA) program in 2021.



Bushiri and Dareen also completed the CNA program and have obtained employment in the NICU at UVA Medical Center.

In their own words

“I Will Never Accept Failure”

by Dareen Aloudeh, Syria

An LVCA student since 2015, Dareen worked hard to improve her English, earn her GED, and start a career in the medical field. Here, she recounts how her challenges shaped the person she has become.

Not many people experience getting forced to leave their home country. It was never my decision, however, it was a step that I had to do.

When the war started in Syria, my family and I assumed it would end. We thought it's only a few small events and that everything will be fine soon. Months later everything started to fall apart. It started with a few teenagers asking for freedom, to a point where it was impossible to leave my house to find medicine for my little disabled daughter. Leaving my home country wasn't only leaving my house, but it was losing everything I had for almost 30 years: my family, friends, and life.

I packed everything in a small bag that only weighed 20 kg (44 pounds). I entered Egypt, with the mind that I will pack my stuff again to go back to Syria. Three years passed, but Syria was getting worse every day, and the idea of going back started to be impossible. I tried to make Egypt my second home, but medical help for my little daughter was unavailable. I had to get the bags again, but this time not to go back, but to go to a different country.

Moving from Syria to Egypt wasn't that big a change. It was the same language but different dialogue, but the people and cultures were the same. Coming to the USA was a whole different world. I didn't know the ABCs. I was lost in this big country and culture. However, I know I am a person that will always want to do more. I didn't stop here because I didn't speak the language. I wanted to learn and help my family. I didn't want an interpreter every time I went to the hospital, or for any meetings in schools for my kids. I wanted to communicate with people face to face without anything in between. I didn't want to see myself as less or different.

When I stayed in the hospital with my daughter during her first surgery, people were talking around me. All I wanted was to know what they were chatting about. At that moment I decided I wanted to learn English. I wanted to earn a GED. I wanted to show everyone that they can do everything they want and nothing can stop them. I learned



Dareen, her husband Ahmad, and their four children immigrated to the United States in 2015.

to never give up. I was able to earn my GED and CNA during the pandemic of 2020. I got a job at UVA hospital on the same floor where I made my decision to learn English.

Walking in the halls there nowadays reminds me of the moment when I decided to learn English for the first time. All the challenges I faced shaped the person I am today. Getting out of my home country, and getting into a country I didn't know anything about. There were many ups and downs in my life, but the most important thing I learned is to never accept failure and to always take action for any chances you get.

Dareen is now focused on obtaining U.S. Citizenship, with the support of her long-time LVCA tutor. She and her husband are also taking LVCA citizenship classes together, and they hope to have their naturalization interviews this spring.

Technology Drives Citizenship Program Growth During Shutdown

Despite all of the instructional challenges the pandemic caused, our Citizenship program is flourishing. Technology and virtual instruction are allowing us to reach students in many different ways.

We discovered early on in the pandemic that offering our Citizenship classes on Zoom allowed more students to participate. As word spread about our program, class sizes grew. We now offer six class sessions every five weeks.

By overhauling the citizenship section of our website, we now provide learning resources for students to access directly and more online support for tutors as they design citizenship-focused, one-on-one instruction for their students.

Our Citizenship Coordinator, Catherine McCall, also began creating instructional videos on our YouTube channel, which are shared with students each week. Our YouTube “view counts” and anecdotal reports confirm that students are

taking advantage of these additional resources.

We are excited that we’ve been able to provide more opportunities for citizenship instruction and additional resources to our students as a result of the move to online learning. And we’re thrilled that, despite the challenges of the pandemic, so many people are continuing to work towards their goal of becoming citizens.

Right: Maria became a citizen in December.

Below: Citizenship class enrollment has steadily increased each month thanks in large part to students refer friends and family.



Justin points to his home country, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, during his recent new student intake.

Welcoming New Students and Tutors at a Limited Capacity

At the start of the pandemic, we sadly stopped enrolling new students and training new tutors. Our program shifted to helping those currently in our program stay connected in the new virtual landscape. We offered countless hours of workshops, tech support, and Zoom check-ins with tutors and students to provide support wherever we could.

We launched virtual tutoring training last fall and we have trained sixty-six new volunteer tutors as of mid-March. Now we have begun accepting new students again, although at a limited capacity. We anticipate enrolling eight to ten new students each month, and as tutor training sessions continue to grow and COVID-19 restrictions are loosened, we hope to increase that number.

While we are not prepared to say when we will fully resume normal operations, we are excited to start welcoming new faces into our program.

Connections through Conversation

Conversation groups have always been an integral component of our program. They allow students from all backgrounds to practice their conversation skills while learning the nuances of the English language.

After a brief pandemic-hiatus, our classes resumed online last summer. Small-group classes, even if done virtually, bring our students together as they all work towards the common goal of improving their English skills.

We found that, just like the rest of the world, our students felt the effects of the shutdown the pandemic forced upon us all. Social isolation was hard on everyone, but especially so for those who are new to our country.

“Already living in a foreign country, some have become depressed due to isolation,” said Sara Gondwe, a longtime class leader. “Mothers talk about being with their children all day, not feeling confident to help with homework and keep them busy. Students have shared with me that LVCA classes have become so much more meaningful to them as it is their only connection with others.”

Our volunteers offer six drop-in opportunities every week for students to join in conversation with one another. Each class is a little different. Discussion topics range from current events, to artwork, to sharing personal stories about each student’s culture and customs.

“The students always impress me with their desire to have any kind of interaction with English,” said Nicolas Finck, a volunteer class leader. “Some like to talk, some only listen, but when asked, they all say they feel that exposure to the language in a friendly atmosphere is good.”

Here are a few anecdotes from recent classes we thought you would enjoy:



Pre-pandemic, Melinda’s class met in our large classroom at the Jefferson School.

“I asked today if they had questions about the United States and they did. [One student] wanted to know why there were so many different kinds of people in one country. Great question. Explaining it to someone with limited English was a challenge, but I think they got it. I said their countries were old countries where families had been for generations but we were a new country so everyone came for opportunity. To which they said, ‘Ah...Freedom.’ Lovely moment.”

—Melinda, Friday Conversation Class Instructor

“Students were asked to name one thing they liked about Charlottesville. One man talked about the various cities he had lived in in other countries, and how this was the best place to raise a family. Several moms talked about schools and educational opportunities for their children. One young woman said, ‘Charlottesville is helping me be the best person I can be.’ What wonderful future citizens!”

—Nancy, Thursday Citizenship Class Instructor

Referring to a lesson plan discussing Amanda Gorman’s inauguration poem: “Just wanted to drop a line to thank you for the link and suggestion of using the youth poet laureate’s speech during the inauguration. It was fun to see the

nuance in the poem that my student had already caught when she watched it the day it was delivered. Beautiful. That will rank up there with one of our best discussions.”

—Annette, Thursday Conversation Class Instructor

Become a Volunteer Tutor

Tutors help adult students improve their reading, writing, and English speaking skills.

Upcoming training sessions will be held on Zoom:

Tuesday Evenings
April 20, 27, & May 4
6:00–8:00 p.m.

- or -

Thursday Mornings
May 20, 27, & June 3
10:00 a.m.–12:00 noon

Volunteers should be confident with technology and prepared to make a one-year commitment.

Visit our website for more details and registration information.

www.literacyforall.org/tutors

Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle
233 4th Street NW, Suite L
Charlottesville, VA 22903
434-977-3838
info@literacyforall.org